Wholeness
Micah 6:6-8; Isaiah 40:1-5, 11
Luke 4:14-21; 15:1-7
September 26, 1971
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The trouble with Jesus was that he would not be anybody's man but his own. Not that people didn't try. His contemporaries were forever trying to push him into one position or another: trying to force his hand so that he would come down squarely for this party and against that one. Once they gave him a coin with the head of Ceasar on it and asked a question designed to reveal where he was in terms of the division between loyalists and revolutionaries. His response: "Render unto Ceasar what is Ceasar's: and render unto God what is God's." That is to say, final truth does not reside in one position or the other but in a combination of both. On another occasion he was put on the spot as an adultress was about to be stoned: a rather clear-cut case of right vs wrong: law vs lawlessness. And his response: "Let the man who is without sin cast the first stone." That is to say: the woman has done something wrong, but the proper response to her wrongness is not necessarily what the law prescribed. On another occasion he was asked what a man needed to do to be saved. His response: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind - and - your neighbor as yourself." There were plenty of people doing one or the other, but Jesus insisted that a combination of the two ethical imperatives was really required.

That particular incident prompts Elton Trueblood to observe: "Modest as the word appears to be, one of the greatest of all Christian terms is the word 'and'. [The New Man for Our Time, p. 29] Time and time again Jesus showed an amazing flexibility and versitility by taking two fundamentally opposing points of view and demonstrating that truth lies somewhere in between or in a combination of the two. Jesus, that is, demonstrated something called "wholeness", an idea which I have come to believe is one of the key concepts in the New Testament. Wholeness - that stubborn refusal to be pushed into a position that excludes the partial truth of another position:

that openness and fairness and evenhandedness that hones in on real issues quite apart from a predetermined position.

Jesus, we believe, is a model. In terms of theology it is stated this way: Jesus was man as God created him to be. And I firmly believe that the most helpful aspect of our model may be defined as "wholeness". And yet I think we have as much trouble with that concept as his contemporaries did. I was talking with a woman last week who was observing that her favorite hymn was "I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked". And from the gist of the conversation I concluded that she would be appalled at some of the places Jesus walked: that she pretty well knew where he would walk today, and that it wasn't out into the street to defend a prostitute, or into the home of a detested traitor, or among the wretched, hopeless poor. That's where I think he would walk - and the fact that both of us assume that we know, lifts up the universal inability of Christian people to deal with his "wholeness". For an honest reading of the New Testament, apart from our exclusive biases, shows that he walked in different, contrasting places: into the temple for instance, as well as the streets: into the homes of wealthy, powerful men of the establishment, as well as among the poor: and that he was buried in the tomb of a very influential man, as well as dying between two thieves.

The person of Jesus, in its wholeness, reflects the basic stance of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The philosophers call it a synthesis; a combination of two logically contrasting points of view. I tried to chose Old and New Testament readings this morning which express the two positions. From the prophet Micah we heard those familiar words, "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to be merciful, to walk humbly." Taken by itself that passage would lead us to conclude that the essence of Judaism was in life lived justly, mercifully and humbly in the larger community. But over against that emphasis there are passages such as Isaiah 40 with its basically individual words of comfort, and Psalm 23, about one man walking through the valley of death. Both positions are evident in the Old Testament -

the strong societal concern for justice and fair play, but also the individualistic word of comfort and love.

The same synthesis occurs in the New Testament. In Luke 4 Jesus spells out his ministry in terms of announcing good news to the poor, proclaiming release for the captives and giving sight to the blind. It is an aggresive, society oriented ministry. But then in Luke 4 we encounter his story about the one lost sheep, and the rejoicing in heaven when one lone individual repents and returns to the fold.

That's wholeness. His contemporaries didn't know how to handle it and I don't think we do either. For the modern day Church of Jesus Christ is badly split at precisely this point, wanting very much to do with Jesus and the Christian witness what his contemporaries could not do, namely come up with an exclusive position at the expense of other, contrasting positions.

The universal, catholic, church of Christ has not ever experienced unanimity on much of anything, and our inability to get along is expressed in the fragmentation of denominationalism. But in our day a very curious phenomenon has occured. Major denominations have moved ever closer together so that today the theological differences between, say Presbyterians, Methodists and the United Church of Christ are negligible. While at the same time every denomination has experienced a serious division within its own ranks. The external conflict has been internalized. Denominational differences have become party divisions within each denomination and all the way down to the local congregation. And the nature of the division is over the two contrasting models which we have been thinking about. The two positions can be called Pietist and Activist.

Trueblood defines them as follows: "an activist is a person who holds that an attack on entrenched social evils is the only part of Christian life worth considering. The characteristic activist pickets, organizes, marches, signs petitions and engages in protests. A pietist, on the other hand, emphasizes the life of prayer, worship, devotion and personal evangelism. . .

he is concerned with the salvation of his own soul . . . and his own peace of mind." [p. 17]

That is where we are in the United Presbyterian Church today. I would guess that there isn't a meeting of Presbyterians on the national, synod or local level that does not, at some point, include a confrontation between the two opposing positions. There is a sizeable block of people in our communion that wants the church to empty itself of all its resources in the cause of equal justice and human liberation. There is an equally sizeable block that wants us to get off the streets and out of the courts and start dealing with the individual souls of men and women. That's the issue that will one day characterize the mid-twentieth century Presbyterian Church in the history books.

It has been suggested, and I think rightly, that this ecclesiastical crises reflects a philosophic split that cuts across our whole culture. There are a couple different ways of seeing it and defining it. Politically, there are power blocks within each major party that have far more in common with each other than the leadership of their own party. Thus successful legislation needs a coalition of conservative Democrats and Republicans, or a similar liberal coalition, and the suggestion is seriously made that we need two new parties that express the differences more accurately.

Another way of seeing it is in terms of those who accept and those who reject the traditional Protestant Ethic. The accepters honor the paying of debts, fidelity to promises, an honest day's work. Unfortunately, some representatives of this position exhibit very little compassion - revealed in that questionable shiboleth, "I worked to get where I am. Why can't they?" The rejecters of the Protestant Ethic, on the other hand reveal deep compassion for the poor, peace and oppressed minorities; and all too often a total lack of sensitivity to responsibility, honestly and tolerance. Neither group shows much tolerance for the other: each has staked out the the other as the enemy - the adversary - and as a consequence we find our-

selves polarized and often immobilized.

Other ways of identifying the division are those who might be called "present-oriented" as opposed to "past oriented": "individualism vs collectivism". Thus one group wants to preserve the past while looking with grave suspicion at anything new: while the other side wades into the present discarding the traditions and wisdom of history. One group views the solution of our problems in terms of changing the attitudes of the individual: while the other focuses on restructuring the institutions and laws of the whole society.

Well someone wisely has noted that "error is often truth out of context." Thus, healing will begin in our society when we develop an appreciation for the fact that opposing positions may both be true - that to deny the validity of the opponent's position is to be radicalized. It is to see that conservatives need liberals: and liberals need conservatives: that wisdom dictates a combination of tradition and newness: that our society needs both changed individuals and changed institutions. The processes of polarization have gone far enough. We are not helped by extremists from either side of the spectrum. We need "wholeness". We are hindered rather than helped by the student who throws a bomb to demonstrate his concern for peace: just as we are hindered by the arrogance of the politician or school official who won't even listen to what the student has to say.

And the Church of Jesus Christ is the one place in our culture where that "wholeness" ought to be practiced and visible for all to see. Just as Jesus Christ is God's model of manhood, so the church ought to be his model of men working together in a spirit of openness and love and wholeness. But we don't stop fighting long enough for it to happen. We can't quite muster the courage to climb down from our rigid positions to see each other and to listen for the truth we have to offer each other.

I've come to believe that there is nothing so sterile as the social activist position in the church that is not rooted in a personal sensitivity

to the love of God in Jesus Christ. I don't think it is enough to give a cup of cold water. We must know and be able to tell the reason why. I think th that's why we're coming apart at the seams over Angela Davis - because Christian people have not been able to connect the love of God and the legal defense fund. Likewise, I think there is nothing more phony than the zealous evangelism that talks about salvation as if it were a private transaction between God and the individual. George Buttrick once said: "If religion does not begin with the individual it never gbegins; but if it ends with the individual - it ends."

As I look for illustrations of men who have found and expressed Christian "wholeness" I think of men like Albert Schweitzer who knew the value of social change - but saw also the value of individual health. Or John Woolman, an 18th century Quaker who was both personally devout but at the same time one of the first to work for the abolition of slavery. Woolman's gift of "wholeness" lead him to regard the slaves as human beings - and also the slave owners: a winsome approach that isn't much in evidence in comtemporary racial conflict.

But most of all I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German Christian, pastor and theologian. Bonhoffer saw the evils of Nazism so clearly that he found himself involved in an assasination attempt on the life of Hitler. He was a thorough activist. But he was also thoroughly devout and unapologetically pious. The last thing the prison doctor at Flossenburg saw him do before his execution was fall to his knees in prayer.

Well, it is that synthesis: that wholeness that I think needs to be reborn within the church, and within each one of us. We need to become whole men: whole Christians. We need to become the kind of people who can slug it out in the political arena and then pray about it. We need to develop the ability to become aroused at the injustices in society - and at the same time aroused at the wonder of God's personal love. We need to be concerned

about the victim of racism: but also about the man who does not know the joy and goodness of God's salvation. We need to be tough and gentle - at the same time. We need to learn how to hate what is wrong while loving those who perpetrate what is wrong. We need to know how to take opposite positions without becoming so isolated from each other that we no longer care, and can no longer share mutual concern or joy. We need to learn how to be honest with each other - but also considerate and loving.

That's what wholeness is. That's what Christians are. And that is what needs to be happening in the life of this congregation. Our culture needs that from the church: our own community needs to see an institution that is whole enough to include people who are on opposing sides of important issues during the week, But can honestly extend to each other the right hand of fellowship on Sunday.

And in the final analysis - we need it. You and I need each other. None of us stands along: none of us has a corner on the truth: all of us need the benefit of open communication with someone whose views we don't like.

It can happen here - if we allow it to. Jesus Christ is the model. His wholeness may become ours.

Amen.

Our father, we allow all kinds of little differences to divide us: but most of all we are divided because we presume to have a monopoly on the truth. Help us to be open to each other. Help us to be whole. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.